

Tasting Santa Barbara County Chardonnay

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Yesterday, the sixth and final day of my road trip south, primarily consisted of a blind tasting of 60 Chardonnays. The tasting was held in a small meeting cottage at the Santa Ynez Inn, and was kindly set up by my friend Sao Anash, who assists many writers when they visit Santa Barbara County.

I had never done a standalone tasting of Santa Barbara Chards. (There were two from San Luis Obispo.) I was interested to see if I could discern differences between the county's various appellations. Most of the Chardonnays were from either Santa Rita Hills or Santa Maria Valley, with some marked simply "Santa Barbara County." These latter were either from Santa Maria or Santa Rita (so far as I could tell) but preferred to keep the better-known countywide appellation on the label, or they were from an interesting region around Los Alamos, which is more or less inbetween Santa Rita Hills and Santa Maria Valley, but does not yet have its own AVA but should. There are fewer and fewer Chardonnays from the Santa Ynez Valley these days, which is as it should be, as it's too warm there, although SYV is great Sauvignon Blanc county.

I'm sure there are people who would conclusively state that there are vast differences between Santa Rita Hills and Santa Maria Valley Chards, but I'm not one of them. Clonal and barrel differences are at least as important in imparting character as a few miles of separation. Both regions have more reasons to be similar than not. In fact, I think of them as basically the same, separated only by the accident of the 101 Freeway. They're both west-east running valleys (unlike any others in California), thus allowing chilly Pacific air (and believe me, the ocean is cold out there) to funnel in, given the westerly or northwesterly breezes that characterize the California coast most of the time. That makes them cool-climate regions. You don't want to grow Cabernet in Santa Maria or Santa Rita Hills. Pinot Noir and Chardonnay are the grapes of choice, although Syrah does just fine, and the occasional other white grape (Pinot Gris, Pinot Blanc) can excel. Not much Sauvignon Blanc works here: too green. Gewurztraminer would probably succeed; Riesling, too, but nobody would buy them, so it's not worth it for vintners to grow.

Soil-wise, I can't tell. They're a jumble down here, now clay, now chalky, sometimes sandy, sometimes stony. As near as I can figure, it doesn't matter as long as they're well-drained. Of course, you need superb viticulture, which all the Chardonnays in my tasting had. One vineyard in particular, Bien Nacido, stood out. But then, it had more entries than any other source.

Santa Barbara County is one of California's great Chardonnay areas and a case can be made that it is the greatest. Certainly there's a consistency of style. The wines always are acidic; that goes without saying. Acidity is one of the touchstones of a great wine, especially a white one, and super-especially when the fruit is as ripe as it tends to get in Santa Barbara. The reason the fruit gets so ripe is because the growing season is incredibly long. Budbreak begins earlier than in the North Coast, and harvest can extend as long and leisurely as the grower wants. It doesn't rain much down here, and such rains as do fall usually wait until November. That means the grapes can hang, hang, hang until they rid themselves of all green flavors and develop marvelously fruity ones. To my palate the fruits tend toward pineapples, Meyer lemons and limes, but that's over-simplifying. The pineapples often have a grilled quality, as if they'd been on a skewer barbecued over hot red

oak. The Meyer lemons have an intense, pie-filling quality, while the limes likewise have a pastry taste, like the Key lime pies I used to bring home with me when my parents lived in Florida. Of course, part of that pie and pastry quality is oak, toasty and smoky and slightly sweet. These Santa Barbara Chardonnays can handle new oak as easily as Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon, for the same reason: they're rich, voluminous wines, broad and impressive in body. Flamboyant in themselves (just try Cambria's 2007 "Unwooded" from Santa Maria Valley if you want to see what unoaked Chard can do), they adapt to oak the way a Hollywood actress on the red carpet shows off haute couture. Beauty clad in beauty equals dazzle.

Santa Barbara whites also have a minerality. We can argue all day what that means and where it comes from. Locals insist its from the white chalky limestone that's exposed on outcroppings. Maybe. The acidity certainly helps inspire a tangy, cold metal-like taste. Whatever the source, this minerality is bracing. So that becomes another factor in Santa Barbara Chardonnay. They have a nervy, electric quality without which the fruit would be merely ripe. Edna Valley Chardonnay has this electric quality. But it seldom has the depth and interest of Santa Barbara Chardonnay.

The overall quality of the wines I tasted was extraordinary. Sao came in two or three times during the nearly five hours (!) I took, just to see how I was doing, and I swear, every time she did I told her in marveled and ecstatic terms how thrilling this tasting was. Wine after wine, so pure and intense, so visionary and translucent, it was hard to pick winners from losers. And in truth, there were no losers. But the wine critic must rank order. That is his job.

How do you determine preferences between wines of such quality? There's only one way: balance. Balance is the exquisite tension between ripeness of fruit (so easy to achieve) and all the other moving parts: Acidity. Oak. Tannins. Length. Finish. Lees influence. Minerality. Richness. Dryness. Malolactic fermentation. Creaminess. Ultimately, balance is impossible to define. It's like former Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart's definition of pornography: "I can't define it, but I know it when I see it."

Well, I know balance when I encounter it in wine. Here are some of the great Santa Barbara Chardonnays I tasted yesterday. All should be current in the market. My full reviews and scores will appear in upcoming issues of Wine Enthusiast Magazine.

Alma Rosa 2008 (Santa Barbara County)
Byron 2007 Wente Clone (Santa Maria Valley)
Fontes & Phillips 2008 (Santa Barbara County)
Cambria 2007 Clone 95 (Santa Maria Valley)
Fess Parker 2008 Ashley's (Santa Rita Hills)
Longoria 2008 Cuvee Diana (Santa Rita Hills)
Melville 2008 Estate (Santa Rita Hills)
Ojai 2007 Clos Pepe Vineyard (Santa Rita Hills)
Rusack 2008 Reserve (Santa Maria Valley)
Vino 2007 Solomon Hills Vineyard (Santa Maria Valley)
Testarossa 2008 Bien Nacido Vineyard (Santa Maria Valley)
Au Bon Climat 2007 Los Alamos Vineyard (Santa Barbara County)

These are awesome Chardonnays that prove there is a "Chardonnay zone" of climate that snakes its way through the county's western canyons and up onto the foothills. They show, also, that both 2007 and 2008 were very great years for Chardonnay in Santa Barbara County.